Fostering a Sense of Purpose in Young People

A person without purpose is like a ship without a rudder. Thomas Carlisle.

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What is the purpose of Positive Education? Many of us would likely respond that by adopting Positive Education in our own school environment, we seek to equip our students with the knowledge, skills and practices that enable them to live a full, flourishing life. In fact, many would also consider the tenets of Positive Education as the pillars of a holistic education which enables young people to feel good, function well and make a meaningful contribution to their world. I would argue that, if we really are to be successful in achieving these outcomes for our students, we should place a strong emphasis on helping them find a sense of purpose, the why that drives them whilst they are at school and beyond the school gates.

So what, really, is ‘purpose’? According to Bronk (2014), most definitions of purpose feature three elements: commitment, goal directedness and personal meaningfulness. In addition to this, he posits that there is a fourth component, a focus on impacting the world ‘beyond-the-self’. Whilst children may have experiences that sow the seed for purpose later in life, it is usually not until adolescence and emerging adulthood that an internalised sense of purpose becomes a possibility. This emerges when an individual discovers and commits to pursuing a personally meaningful aim, whether it be altruistic, family-focused, creative, sporting, spiritual, civic, or via another pathway. Hence, the development of purpose is closely identified with the development of identity (Damon, 2008).

In adolescents, purpose can be viewed as a defining feature of wellbeing. Having, or even searching, for a sense of purpose is correlated with life satisfaction, hope, hardiness, resilience and physical health. Purpose also acts as a protective factor against negative environmental influences and has been correlated with a greater sense of altruism. It is not surprising that there is research highlighting the relationship between purpose and academic achievement; purpose likely inspires greater grit and self-efficacy in young people. And whilst pursuing goals related to our purpose in life may cause stress at times, it is likely that purposeful individuals are better equipped to weather those storms and understand the longer-term rewards associated with them (Bronk, 2014). William Damon (2011), a leading researcher on youth purpose, asserts that ‘the biggest problem growing up today is not actually stress, its meaninglessness.’

If this is the case, how can we help foster a sense of purpose in our students? Encouraging young people to participate in activities such as helping at home, volunteering in the community, faith-related activities, or engaging in the arts can precipitate the development of purpose. However, these activities should not be ad-hoc and there should also be the opportunity to reflect on the meaning derived from them (Fry, 1998; Bronk, 2014). One such activity at Geelong Grammar School is our Giving for A Better World project, part of a collaborative study with Deakin University. In this study, our Year 10 students mentor our Year 8s as they seek to make a positive contribution to their community through projects such as planting trees to raise awareness about deforestation and collecting used books for the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Through this process, our students ‘learn by doing’ and come to understand the value of prosocial action.

Such educational opportunities also assist students with the development of the strengths and
dispositions which may help them pursue their purpose. Damon (2008) has found through his research that the defining characteristic of purposeful youth is an entrepreneurial spirit, which involves: the ability to set clear goals and make realistic plans to accomplish them; an optimistic attitude; persistence in the face of obstacles; a tolerance, or appetite for risk; determination to achieve measurable results and resourcefulness and inventiveness in devising the means to achieve these results. Educational initiatives such as Entrepreneurship Education, Project Based Learning and Genius Hour not only allow students the agency to explore that which they find absorbing, challenging and compelling but may help develop the competencies required to pursue this.

Finally, engaging young people in focused discussion about what matters to them; their personal values and aspirations, can assist them in the development of longer term, authentic goals. Coaching conversations are perhaps the most effective context for this kind of goal-setting. This can take place within a pastoral setting, as part of a careers program or, of course, a positive education program. Damon (2008) also challenges teachers to consider how often we share our own vocational paths with our students. Why did we enter teaching? Why do we love literature, mathematics, or coaching soccer? These stories can have a powerful impact on our students as they explore their own core values.

The correlation between purpose and optimal wellbeing provides a convincing case for an emphasis on purpose in schools. Further to this, fostering a sense of purpose in our students should be the central concern of a holistic education. After all, what more can we hope our young people aspire to than a life which has direction, which is meaningful to them and in which they leverage their strengths to make a positive contribution to the world?

References


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